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ABSTRACT

This brief introduction to the career of early childhood special educator first describes the nature of the special educator's work with infants and preschool children, and then discusses the educator's role in involving families to develop and implement an individualized plan and work as part of a team of professionals and family members. The pamphlet also explains the education required, desirable personal qualities, the job outlook and possibilities for advancement, and some ways for high school students to explore such a career. A practitioner profile describes the work and attitudes of one such special educator. Four organizational resources are listed. (DB)

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CAREERS IN SPECIAL EDUCATION

Early Childhood Special Educator

An infant born with Down syndrome.
A 2-year-old child unable to walk.
A family struggling to adjust to their infant's blindness.
A 3-year-old boy not able to talk.

All these children and their families need the services of early childhood special educators who are specially trained to work with infants, toddlers, preschool children, and their families.

Infants and young children may require special services if they are experiencing delays in their development in some way. They may have hearing or visual impairments; they may have physical disabilities that make it difficult to walk or care for themselves; they may be delayed in beginning to speak or have other problems with their speech; or they may have serious emotional or behavioral disorders. They may have mental retardation or may have a medical problem that puts them at risk for delays in development and learning.

Nature of Work

Early childhood special educators provide direct services to the child, collaborate with the family, and work as a member of a team with other professionals who provide services to the child or family. Infants and their families receive service in centers, in homes, or in a combination of the two. Most preschool age children receive services in a preschool setting at a school or in a community center program.

Working with Infants: Early childhood special educators work with infants who are slow in developing or who have a known disability. Together with the parents they provide a program of activities that encourage the growth of the child's skills. Activities suited to each child's special needs are developed. Parents are fully included in the planning and implementation of the program. For example, to stimulate the movement of a toddler's arms and legs, a parent might be encouraged to dress the baby in brightly colored mittens and booties with bells attached so that the baby can become more aware of his or her hands and feet. If an infant's ability to grasp and hold is delayed or impaired, parents can use toys that hang or roll to stimulate the infant's desire to reach and grasp. A professional can help the parents of a blind child learn ways to develop "ear-hand" coordination (rather than eye-hand coordination) to make possible future explorations of his or her world. Infants with a physical, sensory, or cognitive disability may not be able to smile or gaze in ways that encourage positive social responses from parents and others. In such cases, parents need help in finding alternative ways to interact with their baby.

Working with Preschool Children: Preschool children may receive services in a special classroom or may be part of a regular preschool class. The early childhood special educator could be the teacher of the class or could serve as consultant to a regular classroom teacher. The teachers work with the chil-

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dren to develop social, self-help, motor, language, and cognitive skills. An individual plan is developed for each child to build on his or her strengths and to challenge the child in each of the five areas. Often, what looks like simple play to an outsider can be an intense learning experience for the child! For example, two children playing with play-dough are having fun, but they are also developing fine motor skills as they pinch, pull, and mold the clay; they are having a sensory experience as they squish and smell (and maybe even taste) the dough; and they are developing their communication and social skills as they talk to each other, negotiate sharing, and learn to clean up when they are finished.

Infants **and young children may require special services if they are experiencing delays in their development.**

The early childhood special educator must make sure that the program provided for each child meets the child's special needs. This can be quite a challenge because in one classroom children can have a wide variety of developmental needs. One class may have 10 children without disabilities as well as a child who needs a walker, another child who has a significant developmental delay, and a third child who has a speech delay. Each of these children need a program tailored to meet their particular needs and to utilize their strengths.

Involving Families: Working with families is a vital part of early childhood special education. Professionals meet regularly with parents and families to ask them what their priorities are for the child and to determine what resources they may need, to discuss their child's progress, and to help them meet the needs of the child. It is important to form a partnership with the family.

Parents and professionals develop an individualized plan that addresses the needs of both the child and the family. The plan should include such things as a statement of the child's present levels of development; a statement of the family's resources, priorities, and concerns related to enhancing the child's development; a statement of major outcomes expected to be achieved for the child and the family; and the specific early intervention services necessary to meet the unique needs of the child and the family.

Working as Part of a Team: Early childhood special educators work as part of a team of professionals and the family to provide appropriate services to the children they serve. Some children need physical and/or occupational therapy. Others may need the help of a speech and language pathologist. Social workers and counselors may also provide important services to a child and family. The professionals and parents meet regularly to coordinate treatment schedules, plan the most appropriate program for the child and the family, conduct ongoing assessment, solve problems as they develop, and plan for the child's transition out of the program when appropriate.

Education Required

Most states require at least a bachelor's degree for early childhood special educators. Some states may require graduate coursework beyond a bachelor's degree, some may require a master's degree. Courses required generally include: child development with an emphasis on infants and children up to age 5; atypical development of infants, toddlers, and preschool children; a survey of the different kinds of disabilities children may have; working with families of young children who have special needs; assessment and testing of young children; curriculum and instruction methods; serving as a consultant teacher and member of a team; and environmental and behavior management. It is also important that students learn how to work with children and families from different cultures. An early childhood special education student will have field experiences in childcare, home, or school settings and will be required to do an internship or student

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PRACTITIONER PROFILE

*I*bé Crawley
Preschool Special Educator
Fairfax County Public Schools,
Fairfax, Virginia

Ibé Crawley is a preschool educator in a public school in Fairfax County, Virginia. Ibé grew up in an extended family that included several relatives with special needs, and her grandfather instilled in her a responsibility for community service. After college she worked in several community service programs and became concerned about the needs of the young children she saw. She received a Master's degree in Early Childhood Special Education and has been teaching in a school setting for 5 years. In those 5 years she has taught children who are deaf, children who have physical disabilities, children who are seriously emotionally disturbed, and children with both mild and moderate mental retardation.

Ibé works full-time. Her preschool class is in the afternoon and her morning is filled with meetings with parents and other team members, planning, and training programs. Twice a month she meets with the parents of each child, in their home, to discuss the child's program, hear the parent's concerns, and as necessary, help teach the parents new skills for working with their child.

She also meets with the other members of her team—the occupational therapist, physical therapist, and others who work together to coordinate services and deal with problems that are occurring with the child. She updates program plans for the child, and prepares materials for the classroom and so on. She often goes to training programs to improve her knowledge and skills. She recently went to a meeting to learn more about how to work with children who are HIV positive.

Daily Schedule: The children arrive at 12:00 and stay until 3:45. There are six children in her class, and she has an aide to work with her. When the children arrive they greet one another, take off their coats (which for a child with certain disabilities can be quite an accomplishment), and play as the other children arrive. After lunch, the children gather for a circle time where they sing songs, do finger plays, talk about the unit they are working on, and share experiences with one another. After circle time they have several small group activities, some free play time, and then they spend 30 minutes outside or in the gym. After the children come back into the classroom, Ibé reads them a story—then they act out the story with dress ups! After an afternoon snack the kids get ready to go home.

Satisfaction: "My greatest satisfaction is seeing the children in my class make real gains and knowing that I have helped them get to where they need to be, so that they are prepared to move to their next placement. One little boy was quite a challenge to me. He exhibited autistic-like behavior, swore in the classroom, and was very disruptive. At the end of the school year I was able to look back and see how very much he had learned. On the last day of school during circle time, he said 'I want a turn' and got up and sang a song. That seems like a small thing, but I knew what a tremendous gain that was for him."

Challenges: "The biggest challenge to me is working with so many different kids with such a variety of needs. Sometimes it is hard to feel confident that I have a program that is meeting each child's needs. I look on my job as a practice. We say doctors have a practice and lawyers have a practice. Well, teachers have a practice too. We are constantly learning new techniques, new approaches. It is important for me to feel confident and know that I am doing a good job."

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teaching. Some states have a special certificate for early childhood special educators; other states provide an early childhood endorsement, which is added to an existing certificate.

Personal Qualities

Many different kinds of people choose to become early childhood special educators but there are some characteristics they have in common. They enjoy children and have a desire for each child to develop as fully as possible. They are creative, inventive, and able to adapt teaching methods and materials to the abilities of their students. They are resourceful, open-minded, and have physical stamina. They are flexible and able to deal with many different kinds of people. They have a respect for families and other professionals.

Job Outlook and Advancement

Current federal legislation outlines federal policy concerning the education of and early intervention for infants, toddlers, and preschool children. This action has lead to a push in all the states for early intervention and preschool education for all infants, toddlers, and preschool children with disabilities. This has created a great need for early childhood special educators. The need for qualified professionals has grown each year and is expected to become even greater in the future.

Early childhood special educators can advance to administrative work in schools and government agencies. They can become trainers of other early childhood educators. With further education they can become college professors and researchers.

How to Prepare for a Career

Anyone interested in a career as an early childhood special educator has lots of opportunities to try it out! Preschools and early childhood centers can always use volunteers to help with the children. A family with a child who has special needs might be glad to have someone spend some time with their child. Some high schools have clubs sponsored by The Council for Exceptional Children that provide opportunities for high school students to work with children with disabilities. It's a great idea to get some hands-on practice with infants and children with special needs.

Resource Information

The Council for Exceptional Children
1920 Association Drive
Reston, VA 22091-1589

The National Clearinghouse for Professions in Special Education
1920 Association Drive
Reston, VA 22091-1589

National Center for Clinical Infant Programs
2000 14th Street North, Suite 380
Arlington, VA 22201-2500

National Association for the Education of Young Children
1834 Connecticut Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20090-5786

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